The Collect or opening prayer for today’s Mass speaks of the meaning of Lent. “Convert us, O God our Saviour,” we pray, “and instruct our minds by heavenly teaching that we may benefit from the Works of Lent.”

The first word of the prayer brings out the importance for Lent of deepening our relationship to God and to Jesus. If we are to do that, we will have to do what the prayer calls the works of Lent. Perhaps the most important of these are prayer and love of neighbour, especially of those who are in need.

Today’s first reading emphasizes some of the negative things that we should try to avoid, things that we are not to do. The word “not” comes back fourteen times in the course of the reading. Almost all of the examples that are given have to do with the way we treat one another. The reading ends on a positive note. It embraces all that we are to avoid in the positive command, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

We are to love others, Jesus says, as we would like them to love us. At the last supper, Jesus added a further dimension to the love to which we a called when he said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” With these words Jesus presents himself to us as the model of the kind of life to which we calls us.

Today’s gospel offers an overview of the kind of actions that might be thought of as “works of Lent.” They are all examples of love of neighbour. Jesus speaks of those who are hungry or thirsty, who lack clothes or housing, those who are sick or are in prison. People in such situations cry out for understanding and help.

In today’s gospel, Jesus offers us an additional motive for acing. He identifies himself with those in need, “Truly I tell you,” he says, “just as you did it to one of the least of these bothers and sisters of mine you did it to me.”

Prayer in its various forms and active love for those in need: these are things that ought to mark the life of every Christian. They should also be at the centre of our Lenten observance.